INVOCATION: WAR POEMS & OTHERS

BY ROBERT NICHOLS

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ELKIN MATHEWS
CORK STREET, W.

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INVOCATION
WAR POEMS AND OTHERS

BY THE SAME WRITER

POEMS IN
OXFORD POETRY, 1915

INVOCATION: WAR POEMS & OTHERS

BY ROBERT NICHOLS

Malise Bowyer

LONDON: ELKIN MATHEWS
CORK STREET MCMXV

821
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English

TO

MY FATHER

JOHN BOWYER BUCHANAN NICHOLS

English Research Zeitlin 10/24 Hellings

P 48742

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INVOCATION

Courage born of Fire and Steel,
  Thee I invoke, thee I desire
Who constant holdst the hearts that reel
  Before the steel, beneath the fire.

Though in my mind no torment is,
  Yet in my being's hazard mesh
There run such threads of cowardice
  That I must dread my untrue flesh.

Therefore possess me and so dower
  The sword's weak spot that the true blade
May nor in least nor direst hour
  Betray the spirit unafraid:

For in the past whatever ill
  I did, or good with much of nought,
Daily I strove to make my will
  The soldier of my earnest thought.

And now is opened Honour's way
  And the voice peals I knew times past,
And once again I stoop and pray
  The same short prayer—perhaps my last :

Not passively to suffer ill,
  A world-complacent sacrifice,
But happy and rebellious still
  To prove Faith's courage can suffice.

Death to waylay and slay stalks forth . . .
  One puny out of thousands more
I go to slay the Giants of Wrath,
  Or perish as men have before.

Forward I ride. Guns must to guns
  Intone a final requiem
That those who forged yon mighty ones
  May learn 'tis more to bury them.

FIVE SONNETS UPON IMMINENT DEPARTURE

SONNET

Look up, O stricken eyes that long have pored
Over the sickliness of a young heart
Diseased with double doubt and the abhorred
Drugs of Self-will and Pity. Scan the chart
Of Freedom in a new and noble cause.
The Past is dead. A New Age now begins
Of noble servitude to nobler laws
Than those that barred by custom your lame sins.

All that is terrible is yours to face,—
You that once sought the dark noon of the storm
And only found a dust and a disgrace,—
Peril affronts you in heroic form:
Lift up your head. Prove that which was your boast
Though deemed long dead,—or be for ever lost!

SONNET

I HAVE no strength now save in my new will :—
Having sought Love whom Chance bade me desert ;
Too false for Love, Passion pursued until
My heart was soiled and sickened by mere dirt ;
Too stale for Passion, Fame I sought and found
Poor Notoriety, more fool than knave,
Liberty next, but left lest I were bound
To prove for Her that I too dared be slave.

Lost to Love, Fame, Passion, Liberty,
Afraid to face their debts I have incurred,
Alone I go resolved to render Thee,
England, such due as one who ever erred
Toward thy dispraise dare pay silently :
A life unworthy and a fame deferred.

SONNET

You, my unwitting love, I see debate
In your small head the hazard of my choice
Not lightly yet not gravely, know that Fate
Speaks to me through you with no doubtful voice.
I love you ;—my love a piteous chance
Yet sweet !—ill-chance not being loved again !
And now know fully what I did but glance,
You have but guessed the hundredth of my pain.

And why should you ? Why should I trouble you ?
I am ashamed you have guessed aught, though small—
Despite my love is healthier than the blue—
And since my time is come I will not fall
To beggary, but bid a dumb adieu,
For Love and War are Fate, and Fate is all.

SONNET

Begin, O guns, your giant requiem
Over my lovely friend the Fiend has slain
From whom Death has not snatched the diadem
Promised by Poetry ; for not in vain
Has he a greater glory now put on
Since, bound with cypress black, his boyish head
Shines on Death's crowded groves as none has shone
Since Sidney set a-whispering the dead.

Begin, O guns, and when ye have begun
Lift up your voices louder and proclaim
The sick moon set, arisen the strong sun,
Filling our skies with new and noble flame.
The Soldier and the Poet now are one
And the Heroic more than a mere name.

SONNET

If it should hap I being summoned hence
To an unknown and all too hazardous bourne,
One should bring news charged with this heavy sense :—
He has gone further and cannot return,
Waste not your hour in weary 'Why?' and 'Whence?'
In grief that my young years be compted so.
I grieve not. Nor should you. My recompense
Grows with the years and with them yours shall grow.

For England's fairest, her best beloved lands,
Her watchful hills, her slumbrous trees and streams
Shall surely teach a heart, that understands,
What depth and amplitude of noble dreams
She gives and how content into her hands
I yield the little life without her seems.

THE CHINK

WEEPING I listen and I wait,
The night grows long, the night grows late. . . .
Still gird the guns. But now a pause
And lo ! a chink of night withdraws
And strange and distant, thin and high,
I hear the lost and human cry.
The victors and victorious slain,
The vanquished and their dead again
Sing : 'We have slain a Foeman tall,
Death the dreadest Foe of all.

For bound with our own bloodied bands
One is given in our hands,
And the steel that slit our side
Has his red hands crucified,
We have made a gain of loss,
Giant War hangs on his cross.

Nothing fair has man assayed
But by loss his gain was made.
Giant War is dead, but still
Live more giants that do ill.

Sword and trowel each to hand
On the scaffold take your stand,
Guard and build what we began,
Man's Jerusalem for Man.'

NIGHT BY THE SEA: 1915

What is this sound that only seems to chide?
And subtle light suffuses the black height?

It is the Sea mourns through the angry tide,
Behind the inky veil it is the light.

Amazed I see in all the infinite
Pity I thought I alone felt to-night.

MOONLIGHT

Huge low moon seemingly sonorous
As a shield to the clash of the booming sea,
Do you mark with pleasure the haste of seas racing white,
Clamouring in tumult together
Along the rolling beams of your level light ?

If so here
Why do you hang piteously bright as a tear
Looking with longing eyes upon the dead
That sprawl stiffly in Flanders' fields ?

Double-faced is Humanity,
Double-faced as the moon,
Which to pity and anger yields.
I hear around shouts portending the slain,
And above them the clear
Midnight voice of man
Who sits, head on hands, still as a stone,
Cirqued by the dead with faces chalked by the moon,
And who weeps the loss to the world no blood can atone.

SONNET

Now when I feel the hand of Death draw near
  While yet no laurel stands upon my brow,
I ask what can sustain me, what is dear
  Was dear once and remains so even now?
Fame, Wisdom, Love, the high inheritance
  Of noble words and actions can no more
Beacon my spirit being changed of chance
  To the bright rags on which the crazed set store.

Grown child again I turn my thoughts—too late—
  Back to the quiet house upon the hill
Where shine—alas! more than sea-separate—
  Those human hearts I loved, and harder still
Eyes too oft grieved by th' importunate
  And crooked workings of my hazard will.

FRANCE, 1915.

EPITAPH

Ask not how it came I died
Whom no power on earth could save,
But know that this man was crucified
Who speaks to you from the grave.

Ask not whom the grass overgrows ;
Was his purpose sure or unsure ?
Happy alone who knows
His purpose and can endure.

1914.

BEFORE JERUSALEM

O Thou Jerusalem, Jerusalem,
Thou chiefest jewel in God's diadem,
Thou flushing flower most delicate
Crushed in a hand unconsecrate,
Sweet Bride of God we come to rescue thee
With banners and with bells and minstrelsy,
As 'twere God's squadrons pouring through the arches,
With shaken mist and flame began our marches,
Our swords were fire, our plumes were founts of flame,
Our trumpets were the echo of God's name.
Under our silken pennons red and white
We passed and looked not or to left or right,
But with dazed head and unheard thundrous feet
Threaded the crooked, banner-blazoned street.
There was great silence among all us knights,
Only behind our eyes blazed sudden lights
Passing a fiery cross back and again
Lighting the chambers of the dreaming brain.

And in this silence upon each dim soul
A Voice was heard speak each slow word the
toll
Of a huge silver bell in depths apart
Chiming the fullness of the brimming heart :
"Follow, follow, for where I am Thou art!"

O Thou Jerusalem, Jerusalem,
Thou chiefest jewel in God's diadem,
I am the sword of God that shall decide,
I am His flame to cirque thee far and wide,
Lily of Delight! Lily of Delight,
Watered by His tears, by blessing made bright!
Stone upon stone, cast down, overthrown
Shall He build Thee again! A red rose blown
He gathered petals blown by the wind
Of His fury on sins wantonly sinned.
By blows of hammers driving in nails
Through quivering palms He builds, He assails.
O crystal vessel flushed incarnadine
With blood more red than sacred ruby wine,
The dregs of thickened hatred from the cup
Shall the Lord's hand spill and fill brimful up!

The blaring trumpet of God's earnest voice
Speaks in us and our leaping limbs rejoice,
From singing strings on our bows arcs of fire
Strung with the strings of heaven's luteing quire
Spread paradisal-plumèd arrows of desire!

Jerusalem, Jerusalem, O bright
Lily, amber-hearted lily of delight,
Through flood, through fire our tearing feet have trod,
With a seraphic speed our feet are shod
The foremost squadron in the van of God.

But Thou, Jerusalem, Jerusalem
Hast looked at those that came
And markëd them—our mail is red with rust,
Our broidered bridles fall apart in dust,
Our blood is brown upon our seamèd hands,
Our plashy plumes hang down in wisps and strands;
So stalwart once our horses, ribbed and lamed,
With crooked knees, hollow-flanked, sored and maimed
Hang down their heads and watch with raw, dull eyes
Thee, O Jerusalem, our journey's prize:

Gaunt horses and gaunt men to Thee ! But gaze
Within the battered vizor, with amaze
Thou shalt see calm and starry pupils stare
And know the men for hidden angels there. . . .

O Thou Jerusalem, Jerusalem,
We are the tide no earthly might can stem.
Angels we rode with angels through the night
Hearing the unheard songs to left and right,
And wings that surged and feet's majestic paces,
Brushed by the dark that hides immortal faces.
With banners and with bells and winding flame
That through our hearts blew, His sure message came,
'Lo, I am with you,' till our hands clenched tight
And to our rounded eyes there grew a light.

1912.

ECHOES FROM AN HEROIC CHORUS

Lonely is Man from his youth,
He saileth uncharted seas,
But glimpsing the star of Truth,
His sail the mark of Fate's breeze ;
Yet who looks upon heaven and hell
And fears not to hazard his all,
Whose purpose not Fate can quell,
Whose will no storm can appal
Shall truly possess his soul,
And calm shall his aspect be
Whether he find his goal
Or be swallowed alive by the sea ;
He is justified of the Earth,
He hath spent what was given to spend ;
And She who regrets a slave's birth
Shall give him peace in the end.

CRISIS

THERE comes a moment when the moony tide
Draws its full strength and sleeps upon the verge
Before . . . how suddenly ! it backward slide
With a reverberate and sullen surge ;
The mature sun stands on the darkling hill
Beaming the moment's triumph in his round,
The open-bosomed rose floats white and still
One moment ere it circle to the ground.

So at the topmost minute of our hour
We stand and feed upon each other's eyes,
And feel in us a dumb and deathless power,
And become glad and generous and wise
Before . . . before flutters apart the flower
The deep calls and the last beam, waning, dies.

1914.

CHANT PROSPECTIVE OF TO-MORROW'S BURTHEN

MANY jewels hath Love and one
Hath He given me:
Not the Emerald, Hope's quenchless sun,
Green as the brilliant sea;
Nor Possessed Desire
A Ruby red;
Nor the Opal, a sea-mist flecked with fire,
The gem of Strange Joy and Secrecy;
But He hath made mine
A cold stone, blue and clear,
A tear—
An Amethyst, the certain sign
Of durance and pain and death;
Love hath given me a jewel out of those that He hath,
And lo, this saddest, this fairest is mine!

Who hath given love and found none returning?
Who lieth forgotten a dry, white ember?
Who hath been fired and forgets the burning?
I too have known and would not remember.

I too have known.
Whom hath the lightning smitten
And laid straight as an arrow?
Who hath been in the grave
In his dungeon narrow?
And lain forgotten
And been dissolved, fallen fruit turned rotten?
So that the soul forgets that it ever
Lived and was glorious?
Who hath stood by the grave and felt the sever
As of flesh from bone,
The loved from the living?
Thou art not alone.
I too have known.

Who hath forgotten that he was a man
For years wandering the stony wilderness
Mad and naked, and when he ran
Flesh that followed him also ran
And ceased not running until he ceased;
Until he became
A beast followed by another beast
And fell down in the dust that was warm
Under that sky of hot, still flame.
While out of the skies there gathered a swarm
Of vultures that guessed the new-fallen beast

And creaked downwards on tattered wings,
Who gorged the rank guts, laid bare the red bone,
Who jerked at the heart's thin quivering strings
And hopped and fluttered over the feast?
I too have known.

Who hath awakened in his bed
And groaned to see upon the pane
The slow, white breath
Of a new dawn spread?
Who hath groaned in his heavy spirit and said
'All these hours! and so far away
The bourne
Till sleep like death
Cradle its own,
Soothing the lids of the eyes that mourn?'
Who hath hated the light? One answereth:
I too have known.

Whom have the fires of a long grief blackened,
Whose hands are stamped with red flowers of the nail?
Who with the blind and the dead has been reckoned?
Who hath seen Sorrow without her veil?

Who hath traversed the desert and lonely
place,
Whom hath Fate driven on his journey alone ?
Who hath looked on the Gorgon's beautiful
face—
And slowly and wholly been turned to stone ?
I too have known.

June, 1914.

LOSS

At my feet I find a flower
Flung in a moonlit hour
Up by the sea.
It is no flower I know but it is sweet,
Though without scent or colour or even form
Being torn by the sea.
Why is it so sweet
To one who never knew it, why does it bring
Hints of delight
Shadowy as those that perplex and sweeten night
When over the body drowsing beneath Sleep's warm wing
The soul's waking eyes glimpse fragments
Of the light
That here they cannot wholly see
And become dazzled with remembering?

Who brought you, flower? Whence do you come?
How do I know you? What is your home?

The wind sighs and the friendly ripples creep
One by one
From the smooth steaming sea that heaves in sleep,
The flower drops away from my hand. There flows
One ripple forward,—and the flower is gone:
Whither the sea alone knows.

The sea alone knows.

July 1, 1915.

THE SOLDIER

The sombre clouds rolled slowly over the low plain
Rutted with level plough lines and lit with pools of rain
Till the enormous silence filled only by the humming blast
Was rent by a cruel cry, and the wild geese winging fast
Onward and onward through the currents of clouded air
Craned down through the misty chasms to see what thing lay there.
By a ditch of Flanders beside an arrowy road,
Which stretched to the horizon where a fired farmstead glowed
Exhaling a tremulous light and winding a murky tress
Of billowy smoke over the wilderness,
A wounded soldier lay watching the birds overhead . . .
They vanished and into his eyes came knowledge of death and the dead.

So feeble was he that scarcely he felt the blood
'twixt his lips
Well up and flow down darkly. Upon him
had gloamed eclipse
When at his ear he heard a strange and terrible
cry
Such as had shaken the marsh birds winging the
dreary sky:
'O God, God, God! I am tormented, I sink.
'O water, water, I burn. Give me to drink!'
And there was no further sound under all the
sky
Nor in the earth save one sharp sweet reply
From the ditch by his feet: a trickle of water
was calling,
Swoln by rain it carolled and tinkled in falling.
But he could not move hand or foot and a noise
Of groaning reached him and a dreamy voice
Sing-songed of water while he lay perfectly still
And cracked his sinews with the heat of his will,
Willing himself to arise but he had not the
strength
To move hand or foot a foot or hand's length.
And when he found he could not stir to arise
Two warm tears welled and rolled out of his
eyes,

And he began to pray, saying unto God
Brokenly and in stupid words how he lay on the sod
And could not move, and would God look down and give
Just one minute of boyish strength that he might strive
To succour somebody—friend or foe—near him. But God would not,
And he complained endlessly till the cramp of the shot
In his side tied and untied within like a knot.
And he fainted. And the sombre clouds flocked slowly over the slaughterous plain
Above the glimmering road that divided the slain from the slain ;
And the spent neighbour rolling his eyes at the sky far and wide
Gurgled, his mouth floating blood, and cursed God and died.
And the water in the ditch cried happily and increased till it soaked
The thirsty dead's feet and the sweeping wind stroked
Softly the matted fair hair of the soldier until he lay,
Save for this, stiller than the clotted thick clay

That in acres of ruts stretched silently
To the deserted dykes and the desolate sea. . . .

. . . . .

The sombre clouds rolled slowly over the low plain
Rutted with level plough lines and lit with pools of rain,
In whose shallow mirrors the majesty of the sky
Figuring the funeral of heroes filed slowly by.

December, 1914.

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